

## Scared to Death No More

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Anne E. Hodges-Copple*

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*St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Durham NC*

*“And the women came out and ran away from the tomb because they were filled with terror and amazement and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*

Or as the New Jerusalem Bible puts it: the women ran away because they were frightened out of their wits. Sounds rather contemporary, even vernacular, doesn't it? And yet, that is really a rather more accurate way of translating the Greek in this passage; frightened out of their wits captures the mental and emotional tumult of Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Salome when the mysterious young man tells them that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead and intends to meet with them in Galilee. This news scares them out of their right minds.

As the women approach the tomb, just as the sun is rising, they are surprised that the large stone covering the opening of the tomb has been rolled back. Now some of us might have a little fear and trepidation at this point. But, of course, their return to the tomb is not at all like one of us going back to a cemetery a couple of days after a body has been interred in a crypt only to find someone left the mausoleum door open. This is not a scene out of Scary Movie 3. These religiously observant women return to the place of Jesus' burial fully expecting to re-enter into the tomb and complete the rest of the burial customs they had to leave off when the Sabbath began Friday at sundown.

Even so, the women were surprised, curious, perhaps a bit suspicious given the horrific events of the last two days when they saw the stone rolled away from the door of the tomb.

But upon entering the tomb their surprise does turn to alarm: Jesus' body is gone and a stranger is sitting in the empty tomb. The young man immediately sees their fear and amazement and responds: “Do not be alarmed: you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised, He is not here.”

**Do not be alarmed?** Why shouldn't they be alarmed? As if the arrest of Jesus on Thursday night was not alarming enough? As if the trial and torture of Jesus were not excruciating enough. As if the scattering of most of the disciples and the various betrayals by others were not terrifying enough. As if watching Jesus die a slow and agonizing death on a cross was not heartbreaking and horrifying enough:

...now, his body is gone. What else could they be, if not alarmed?

But it is what the young man says next that turns alarm into terror and amazement, or in the words of the NJB frightens them out of their wits: “You must go and tell his disciples and Peter, “he is going ahead of you to Galilee, that is where you will see him, **JUST AS HE TOLD YOU.**”

Instead, the women turn and flee from the tomb. They run away in fright and said nothing to anyone. Why were these women so beside themselves with fright? What thoughts flew through their minds to the point they couldn't think or speak? Did they believe it? Did they believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead? Did they believe that he would meet them in Galilee? That they would see him and touch him and hear him and even share meals with him again? Did they even believe in the resurrection?

Do you? Does any part of this account surprise you, alarm you, turn your world upside down or frighten you out of your wits?

I didn't think so.

Or does all this talk of the resurrection –the bringing back to life of someone who has actually died with a new and somehow different physical body – just make you a little confused and even – admit it – a little embarrassed? I suspect a great many of us are attracted to some other more digestible and rational explanation for the empty tomb that first Easter morning and the days and weeks that followed.

Maybe the disciples went to the wrong tomb and just couldn't find Jesus' body. Maybe the body was stolen as a final cruel act on the part of Jesus enemies? Or perhaps stolen as the beginning of an even crueler hoax on the part of some misguided disciples.

Maybe in their grief the disciples began to have a strong sense of the presence of Christ among them. So strong it was as if he were in the room. Maybe some had visions of Jesus and these visions evolved into stories of resurrection. Maybe those naïve folks got carried away with their guilt and their hopes and some wishful thinking.

Or maybe..... it is we, the Christians of the twenty first century who have let our hopes and wishful thinking about science and rationality get carried away. Maybe this is the sad nature of our seeing is believing times. If I haven't seen it or don't understand it then surely I can't be expected to believe it. (Unless it is wireless internet access or TiVo. I don't understand those; but I believe!)

If I haven't seen the resurrected body of Jesus; if I can't explain the resurrection, then that somehow gives me the green light to reject the clear and compelling accounts of all four gospels plus the letters of Saint Paul, written before the gospel accounts were put into writing. Because you see, despite some interesting differences in a few of the details, all the gospel accounts agree on the basics: *the tomb is empty on that first Sunday morning after the crucifixion*. Despite the best efforts of the Roman authorities to secure the tomb and despite the clear expectations on the part of women that they would find the lifeless body of Jesus in the tomb; despite it being in everyone's best interest to find the body in the tomb: he's not there!

The accounts in Mark, Matthew Luke and John, all written at different times and handed down through different witnesses in different communities and even with different theological axes to grind agree: Jesus was raised, bodily raised from the dead. And the resurrected Jesus spoke to them, ate with them and even allowed them to touch his resurrected body.

Hey: if the disciples were going to make this up, would they create a hoax that starts with women as the first witnesses to the empty tomb? Women by the rules of their culture, were not allowed to be witnesses in matters of any great importance. Why be so specific about the time of morning? Why mention the Spices. Or the large stone. Or which side of the tomb the stranger sat on? Or why mention the fact that the women were too frightened to speak....at least at first. Because obviously, they did finally find their voices. or how else would we hear this account today?

Just a couple of days ago, I received a letter in the mail signed by the three daughters of a couple I've known since we were all in college together over thirty years ago. These daughters are planning a surprise celebration in honor of their parents' thirty-first wedding anniversary. In the letter Kate, Molly and Elizabeth give a really lovely account of the News Year's Eve, thirty two years ago, when their parents became engaged. Now, the oldest of these daughters is twenty-four. She and her sisters were not present at the New Year's Eve party where their future father kept fumbling with the small velvet box in his coat pocket. . They could not have seen how their future mom kept eluding her boyfriend's attempts to find a private moment as she flitted around the party among family and friends. They didn't see their how their future aunt, the younger sister of the bride to be, walked in at just the wrong moment and disrupted the future bridegroom's big plans. They weren't there when Carter finally caught Kerri alone and bent his 6 ft 2 frame down on one knee and finally asked his burning question and pressed the ring into Kerri's hand.

Molly, Kate and Elizabeth wrote down a beautiful account of their parent's engagement and sent it out to dozens and dozens of people. This is their loving account of a sacred family story they have heard told over and over, for years and years and from at least three eye witnesses and probably many more perspectives of those around that night. They have finally take the time to write the story the way they've heard it. And who knows if they've gotten it exactly right? They didn't run this letter by their parents.

I wasn't there that New Year's Eve. Kate, Molly, and Elizabeth certainly weren't there. And yet I believe that Kerry and Carter become engaged that night in something that closely resembles the account their daughters have written. I believe this account of the past because even though I was not there that night, I believe because I have known this family, this whole family so well for some many years even across some great distances. I believe what these girls have written about that magical night, because I know what I know about the Pidcock-Carter family now.

And I believe this account of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth on the mysterious Easter morning because I know what I know about the living body of Jesus Christ as it exists today in all of you and in all of us.

The shock and incredulity of Mary Magdala and Mary and Salome actually ring true. Yes, Jesus had told them repeatedly that he would suffer, would be put to death and would rise from the dead on the third day. But the disciples had not been able to accept or absorb his meaning.

And is that so surprising? Expectant women are told ad nauseum about what to expect in childbirth. And yet it is impossible to be fully prepared for the actual experience of childbirth. It can be terrifying. I have now taken some training in CPR and how to use the church's Automated Electronic Defibrillator. But don't be surprised that if one of you goes down and your heart stops I might just find myself frightened out of my wits and just run away to call 911.

Just because someone tries to tell you about a life and death experience in advance doesn't mean you won't be terrified when the moment comes. Ask a soldier facing his first battle. Ask a teacher facing a school lockdown.

In the days leading up to entering Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus had spoken of being raised from the dead. Among many Jews of his time there was an expectation of resurrection at the end of the current age and the beginning of the next. The Lord God of Israel had shown the prophet Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones raised, brought to life in new bodies. The prophets, especially Isaiah, had long ago told the people of Israel that the current heaven and earthy would pass away and God would bring forth a new heaven and a new earth and a new people and a new covenant.

So you see the possibility of resurrection was not new or shocking or heretical for these women.

What terrified and confused the women was NOT that they can't believe Jesus has been raised, but that if he has really been raised then **THIS CHANGES EVERYTHING!** The resurrection of Jesus **CHANGES EVERYTHING.** It signals the end of the current age and the beginning of something new. a new age, a new creation, a new life. This was and is just all too much to comprehend. God is making good on the promises of old in ways they weren't expecting. In ways that perhaps we are not expecting.

Whether our twenty first century minds are willing or able to accept it, those first disciples Easter morning and for generations since gave clear and forceful testimony that Jesus died. His body was put into a tomb, on the third day the tomb was discovered empty. And within hours and over the next days and weeks, Jesus appeared to his disciples in a bodily form that allowed him to speak, and touch and even eat with his friends. And most compellingly of all, the disciples experience of the risen Christ, led them and generations after them to risk whatever scandal, derision, imprisonment, and punishment might come with proclaiming this mystery: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

This wave of Christian discipleship, this baptismal flood if you will, has washed over kings and slaves; humbling the mighty, setting free the prisoners. The voice of the risen Christ set in motion an evangelism that tells people different in race, in ethnicity, in cultural and in whatever identify politics you want to name that we can be...that we are called be... that we must find a way to be united as brothers and sisters in One Lord, One faith, one baptism.

So, that was then. This is now. What's changed in your life this Easter morning? What has changed in your life since Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday? Has your life been turned upside down? Do you feel like a new creation? Are you experiencing disorientation as you try to adjust to this incredible news that death has been defeated?

So maybe we are not exactly terrified and out of our wits. Maybe we've allowed Easter to become a little too predictable and liturgical. We love to sing "Were you there when they crucified my Lord. Were you there when they nailed him to a tree? Where you there when they laid him in the tomb?"

But we love to avoid the more stunning and convicting question: Are you willing to proclaim that Christ is alive not just here in church on a gorgeous Easter Sunday morning, but in every part of your everyday life.?

If we are not exactly scared out of our wits, can we try to be at least a little undone, a little unnerved and more than a little passionate about this incredible good news: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

I don't need to understand *how* God raised Jesus of Nazareth from dead. There are lot's of things I don't know how it happens, but I know it happens. The lights come on. The computer pulls information from space and puts it at my finger tips. My husband still loves me.

I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because I see in the lives of imperfect disciples, then and now, willing to give up everything in the sure and certain hope that Jesus Christ has promise us everything we need in the present and in the future.

You know what my favorite part of the Gospel lesson is? When the young man tells the women "He's not here." The women are looking for Jesus in the wrong place. You won't find Jesus just going about business as usual. You won't find Jesus by just going through motions....doing only what the world wants you to do. The Risen Lord is not interested in empty gestures, but he is more than willing to fill the empty places in you life. He is risen. He has gone ahead of us. And he is calling us to follow. Amen